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ABSTRACT

The notion of literature's difficulty must have begun with its first interpreter. Biblical readings sometimes allegorized scripture into moral precept, while occult readings (i.e., Gnostic writings) often carried an implication that such texts are either for an elite readership or represent the essence of a tradition of spiritual truth under threat of extinction by modern materialism and science. The difficulty of difficulty is not that it is difficult, but that people do not face difficulty soon enough. Two problems arise as a result. First, the opportunity to take advantage of the fascination of difficulty itself is lost, and second, to put off difficulty is to increase difficulty in the same way that the difficulty of learning a foreign language is increased immeasurably when delayed past the earliest grades. In reading, it is beneficial to offer students a puzzle, and engage them in the dialectic of convention and variation or revolt. Extreme texts, not at the periphery but in the center, and therefore strange, are actually quite useful for this endeavor. Students need to come to understand that to read a text is never a terminal event like the placement of the last jigsaw piece. To learn this and be able to live with it and be satisfied with it is itself a solution. With literature, the process of reading is more important than the destination. (Thirty-five references are included.) (PRA)

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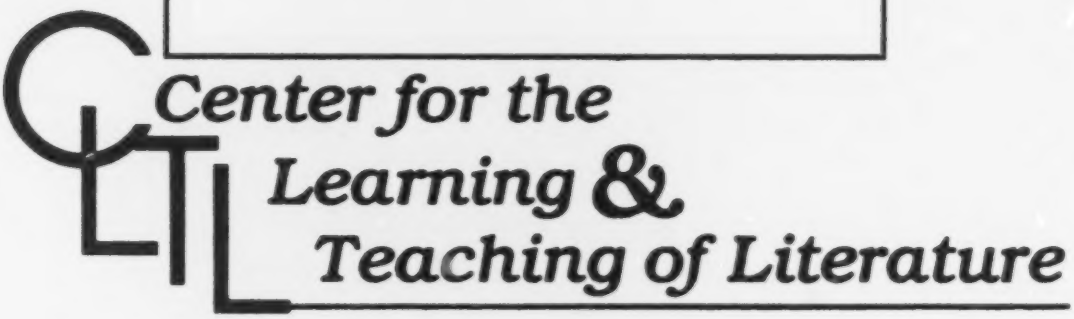
Hazard Adams



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The Difficulty of Difficulty

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The notion of literature's difficulty must have begun with the first interpreter and been early sustained by the first priesthood to have developed a vested interest in mystery. As formal interpretation in Western culture begins with commentary on Homer and Holy Scripture so, no doubt, does the concept of literary difficulty. But what is deemed difficult in one age is often not what is focused on as difficult in another. In modernism and postmodernism difficulty has been perceived in new ways that challenge earlier assumptions of, among other things, the linguistic stability upon which early notions of difficulty had been based. Before we examine the implications of this for pedagogy, it is worthwhile to study some of the history of interpretation and some of the things that were (and sometimes still are) regarded as the major sources of difficulty for readers.

I.

Certainly for a long time this issue revolved around a difference between so-called "literal" and "allegorical" readings of the Bible and of classical texts. The essence of literality in this early sense is to suppose that what one is reading is an historical account. There is also often assumed to be a fictive literality or what some think of when they refer to a "good story." Yet even those who have insisted on the strict historical literality of the New Testament have interpreted Jesus' parables in an allegorical fashion; and, faced with defending "good-stories" against the charge of triviality, readers have over centuries developed complex interpretations that have frequently been based on the assumption that there is in the text more than meets the eye, an allegorical depth containing a valuable precept.

I hope it is fair to say, then, that the concept of literary difficulty arose from a twofold root: first, the establishment of mystery in a holy text to be guarded and regulated by a special class of priestly initiates and, second, the desire to defend by recourse to hidden meaning secular works of fiction against those who would identify fictions with untruth. Both cases generated interpretations and interpretive traditions that gave rise to charges of willful obscurantism and outrageous liberties taken with texts. Such charges are by no means unknown today, though now based on other grounds. Generally in such interpretations the effort was to show that the text hid beneath its "literal" surface a valuable teaching, often rescuing a surface that was politically or morally suspect. The earliest readings of Homer were interpreted in the direction of what was later called moral allegory, often of a Platonic sort. Biblical readings sometimes allegorized Scripture into moral precept or, in the most radical cases, doctrines in opposition to established theology, as in the Gnostic writings. Occult readings, of which Gnostic ones are some of the earliest known to us, have had sporadic popularity, often with the distinct implication that such texts are either for an elite readership or represent the essence of a tradition of spiritual truth under threat of extinction by modern materialism and science, and therefore gone underground. I shall discuss both of these views, the first at some length, the second briefly, before getting down to a consideration of contemporary difficulty and the difficulty with it.

The first of these views and to some extent the second are exemplified by an essay of 1632 called "Mythomystes" by a little known writer, Henry Reynolds. He intended to defend the "ancients" against the "moderns," joining a popular critical debate of the time. In his essay he soon identifies the ancients with allegorical expression of hidden occult wisdom. Further, he distinguishes two classes of readers: a priesthood, or an intelligentsia; and the unworthy vulgar, or the multitude. He implies that texts of any value have usually two readings:

> . . . it was enough for the multitude to be by merely the simple story, taught and made to know, now the power of God, now his wrath against the wicked, clemency toward the good, and justice to all; and by divine and wholesome precepts instructed in the ways of religion, and holy life. But those secreter mystics, and abstrusities of most high divinity, hidden and concealed under the bark and rude cover of the words, to have divulged and laid these open to the vulgar; what had it been other than to give holy things to dogs, and cast pearls among swine. (Reynolds, 1632/1971, p. 204)

Having entered the quarrel of the ancients and moderns on the side of the ancients and having invoked allegorical wisdom in their favor, Reynolds subscribes to the theory of the growing decrepitude of the world. The formerly noble estate of poetry is now abused by unlearned charlatans who are interested only in superficial delights. In its essence poetry is the conveyor of occult wisdom, which turns out to be mainly Neoplatonic doctrine - "the understanding of things even farthest removed from us, and most worthy of our speculation, and knowledge" (p. 198). But modern poets have lost touch with the substance of their predecessors' works and have copied only their "style, phrase, and manner of expression" (p. 198). Reynolds compares the moderns to the ancients in three respects and finds them wanting in all three: First, they lack both the ancients' desire to search for high truths and their contempt for worldly profit. Second, they do not hold learning in great respect and, playing to vulgar tastes, do not (as did the ancients) conceal high truth from vulgarization. Reynolds holds that the ancients all the way back to the Egyptians "devised, to the end to retain among themselves what they had found (lest it should be abused and vilified by being delivered to the vulgar), certain marks, and characters of things, under which all the precepts of their wisdom were contained; which marks they called hieroglyphics or sacred engravings" (p. 201). Third, the moderns fail in their ignorance of the "mysteries and hidden properties of nature" (p. 204). The most learned of the ancients were the poets, who knew nature better than any other men and put their knowledge into their works. Too often translators and interpreters have lost the meaning of the great poets and reduced them to moralists only. For Reynolds, knowledge of nature appears to be Cabalistic science, natural magic, astrology, medicine, and physics. Those fables now regarded as scandalous are really allegories. For example:

> . . . who can make that rape of Proserpine, whom her mother Ceres (that under the species of corn might include as well the whole genus of the vegetable nature) sought so long for in the earth, to mean other, than the putrefaction, and succeeding generation of the seeds we commit to Pluto or the earth? . . . Or what can Jupiter's blasting of his beloved Semele, after his having deflowered her, and the wrapping of his son he got on her (Bacchus, or wine) in his thigh after his production, mean other than the necessity of the air's heat to his birth, in the generation; and (after a violent pressure and delaceration of his mother the grape) the like close imprisoning of him also, in a fit vessel, till he gain his full maturity, and come to be fit aliment? (p. 207)

It is clear enough that Reynolds is committed to a concept of poetry as rigidly

allegorical. Such reservations as Francis Bacon had about allegory (and he found no small number of poems to contain it) Reynolds vehemently attacks. Bacon had confessed that he believed many interpreters had twisted ancient fables to desired meanings or turned them into philosophical statements of one school or another. This is too much for Reynolds, who finds value only in the allegorical meaning a work preserves, hides, and yet passes on. Presumably an allegorical interpretation is equivalent to the poem in *every way* that is important. One finds this attitude, expressed with varying vehemence, throughout the tradition in which Reynolds works.

The idea of a kind of poetic whole does, however, occur in some allegorists, who, as the early nineteenth-century Platonist Thomas Taylor suspected of Porphyry, would like to find a continuous allegory in a work rather than small allegories connected by delightful but superficial intervals. In a long footnote to his paraphrase of Porphyry's essay on the cave of the nymphs in the Odyssey, Taylor, for example, attempts to supply the lost unified allegorical reading of the whole Odyssey. Ulysses is "the image of a man passing in a regular manner from a sensible life, and advancing from darkness to light," and all events are interpreted in terms of a pattern which delivers the hero, purified in the end, to the soul and celestial love, namely Penelope (Raine & Harper, 1969, p. 322-42).

Reynolds, who wanted to square his respect for ancient pagan wisdom with his Christianity, or, more probably, his Christian readership, has recourse to a concept of Greek myth as a version of Biblical truth, the characters of Greek myth being made to correspond with those of the Old Testament. This bold connection of Greek myth and Scripture has its counterpart in the similar allegorical methods applied to both. The allegorical interpretation of Scripture has a long history, which appears in its beginnings to be tied up with an effort to eradicate anthropomorphism. As far back as The Letter of Aristeas (c. 100-150 B.C.) there is an allegorization of the Torah. The connection between Neoplatonic and Scriptural allegorizing is evident in Philo Judaeus (c. 50 AD) and in one of Porphyry's teachers, Origen (c. 185-259). Philo regarded allegorical interpretation as a method that had to be learned. One became a sort of initiate. Not always denying the literal level, he thought of it more or less as the body of thought, while the meaning revealed allegorically was the soul or was approximate to it. There is at the bottom of Philo's attitude the idea that reality as such cannot be spoken but only approximated by allegoric presentation: Metaphysical fact eludes literal presentation, and the allegoric is merely the best we can achieve. Our thoughts always surpass our expression, but this should not prevent us from doing as well as we can:

> . . . no one, whether poet or historian, could ever give expression in an adequate manner to the beauty of his ideas respecting the creation of the world; for they surpass all the power of language, and amaze our hearing, being too great and venerable to be adapted to the senses of any created being. That, however, is not a reason for our yielding to indolence on the subject, but rather from our affection for the Deity we ought to endeavour to exert ourselves even beyond our powers in describing them. (Glatzer, 1971, p. 1)

The act of interpretation is a form of piety and celebration, and if it goes only a certain distance, that act in its very smallness affirms the greatness of the divine object, which has no name, names being "symbols [allegories] of created things; seek them not for Him who is uncreated" (Bigg, 1968, p. 40). Language, matter, everything but pure thought is apart from the One (Goodenough, 1962, p. 103).

Philo vigorously combated those who opposed allegorization. In Philo, according to S. G. Sowers (1965):

> . . . the literal meaning corresponds to the sensible everyday world of phenomena and deals with objects, persons, events, and things of the objective world in general. On the other hand, the allegorical meaning lying beyond the literal treats of timeless ideas such as the structure of the creation, the ethical life, and the soul's journey from corporeality to incorporeality. (p. 31)

Thus the story of Abraham is literally the history of a righteous patriarch, but on the allegorical level it is the history of a soul that turns to a higher spiritual reality. Philo's interpretations are often multiple, as in his complex treatment of Jacob's ladder, and he regards Scripture as the creation of prophets who came under divine guidance and often may not have understood what they were recording, like Plato's possessed poets. Even the interpreter must be possessed of grace to achieve the correct reading.

Jean Danielou (1960) describes an interpretation that Philo makes of Genesis in which Adam is the understanding, Eve sensation, and the serpent pleasure. Paradise means virtue and "is planted in the East, for virtue never sleeps, nor does it cease: as the rising sun fills all darkness with light, so when virtue arises in the soul, it enlightens its night and dispels its darkness" (p. 59). Paradise is also wisdom, its trees the various virtues--an allegorization, Danielou remarks, that is taken up by the Christian ascetic tradition. The creation of Eve is the birth of sensation, and occurs while Adam is asleep because "it is just when the spirit is asleep that sensation is most active. . . .The proof of this is that when we wish to think we flee into solitude, shutting our eyes, closing our ears, and shutting out the senses" (p. 60). One detects here the allegorist working very hard to justify every detail of a text in terms of a preconceived philosophy, in this case fundamentally Platonic. The tendency of this brand of Scriptural interpretation is to return over and over again to certain fundamental abstract ideas, and this return in itself must have had a powerful effect on readers' ways of interpreting.

Similarly with Origen, the Genesis story is given moral meaning:

> Our interior man is composed of soul and spirit. The spirit is called man, the soul (*anima*) is called woman. If there is harmony between them they unite frequently and beget sons which are good dispositions and salutary thoughts, by which they fill the earth, that is they lead their bodily senses to higher levels (p. 62).

There is always the problem of why God allowed the Bible to be presented to man in ways that render it so difficult to understand. Philo's answer to this is to attack the anthropomorphic tendency of a purely literal reading. The Bible nevertheless condescends to slow-witted, unintelligent people, who will find it difficult to conceive of God except in human terms like wrath. In any case, for Christian allegorists like Clement and Origen the principle of allegorical reading had the precedent of St. Paul's treatment of Hagar and Sarah and his statement in 2 Corinthians iii that the spirit gives life and the letter kills (Chadwick, 1966, p. 74). For Origen, who finds three levels of allegory--the literal (sometimes absent), the moral, and the spiritual--in scripture, an allegory is really sanctioned by its correspondence to the preconceived Platonic notion of the universe itself, where the divine wisdom is distorted and weighted down in the realm of matter. The Pauline tripartite body, soul, and spirit are thought

to be reflected by analogy in this threefold scheme.

In the Reformation, allegorical interpretation was denounced by Lutherans and Calvinists, but these same people could not, of course, eradicate allegorization from their own readings, though Calvin clearly enough saw the dangers of such readings as undermining the literal factuality of scripture and called them a contrivance of Satan.

There has been among some theologians a long effort to maintain a hard and fast distinction between allegorical and typological interpretation. The basic principle of Biblical typology is that the imperfect order of the Old Testament prefigures the completed order of the New, Christ fulfilling the expectations of the Old. Past events of the Old Testament are figures or types fulfilled in the New and prophetic of Last Things, and the figurally related events are antitypes of each other. Related to this is the concept of analogy, in which the fallen or lower realm of nature is a parallel-opposite of the higher realm, Hell and its contents being inverse counterparts of Paradise and its contents.

St. Iranaeus, who attacked the Gnostics, argued that a clear eschatological order in history, demonstrated by a typological reading of the Bible, showed God's signature upon his works. This, he claimed in a round of circular reasoning, proves the authenticity of Scripture. The historical order is judged divine apparently because it has unity. Certain traditional aesthetic ideas of harmony would seem to have been applied here directly to history. For Iranaeus, the Old Testament contained four fundamental types: the ark of Noah, the crossing of the Red Sea, the Mosaic Law, and the entry into the promised land. Working out a complex set of relationships to the New Testament, Iranaeus went so far as to argue that because Jesus died on a Friday, so must have his antitype Adam. The inference is that *everything* has its antitype. Antitypes, furthermore, can be parallels or parallel-opposites, as in this free-ranging passage from St. Ambrose in the fourth century:

> Adam is born of the virgin earth, Christ is born of a Virgin. The former was made in the image of God, the latter *is* the image of God. The first was set over irrational animals, the second over all living beings. By a woman came foolishness, and by a Virgin true Wisdom. A tree brought death, life comes from the Cross. While one is deprived of his spiritual endowments and is clothed with leaves, the other, deprived of earthly goods, does not regret being clothed with a body. (Danielou, 1960, p. 46)

Danielou himself displays a traditional anxious desire to maintain the historicality of events, the essence of typology being to show that history itself is figurative rather than to replace history with allegorical wisdom.

> It would be an entire abuse of language to include moral allegory with typology under the one heading of the spiritual sense, as opposed to the literal sense. Typology is a legitimate extension of the literal sense, while moral allegory is something entirely alien: the former is in truth exegesis, the latter is not. (p. 64)

But threads of allegorization run through the early typological interpretations, as in the appearance of a mystical, seven generations before Noah. Noah's going into the sea is, incidentally, a type of baptism, both figuring the descent to battle Leviathan, which in turn is related to Christ's descent into Hell.

No Church father would claim to have discovered the principle of typology. It was regarded as implicit in the messianic writings of the Old Testament prophets, who, it is claimed, actually saw the events of their day as types to be fulfilled. It can be said without doubt, however, that the typological interpretation of events began with the very earliest Christians, even with St. Paul (Auerbach, 1959, p. 51-53).

The anxiety about allegory is anxiety that desires to preserve the Bible's figural or typological historicality or literality. Danielou argues that allegory does not represent the sense of Scripture at all. It is merely the presentation of philosophy and morality under Biblical imagery, the method being analogous to the Stoic presentation of morality under Homeric imagery. Typology, on the other hand, is a legitimate extension of the literal sense of the Bible.

The strict separation of the two sought by Danielou was clouded from Origen to the Reformation, at least. One finds a nineteenth-century theologian beginning his book with an account of the mixing of the two modes, with the sole purpose of preserving historicality. Patrick Fairbairn (1852) divides allegory into two sorts:

> 1. When the scriptural representation is actually held to have had no foundation in fact--to be a mere myth, or fabulous description, invented for the sole purpose of exhibiting the mysteries of divine truth; or, 2. When the representation, even if wearing the appearance of a real transaction, is considered incapable as it stands of yielding any adequate or satisfactory sense, and is consequently employed, precisely *as if it had been fabulous*, to convey some meaning of a quite diverse and higher kind. (p. 2)

The difference between a "type" and allegory of the first sense is that the type always required "the reality of the facts or circumstances stated in the original narrative" (p. 3). This is somewhat curiously put, since the facts are said to be "created" in the narrative, whereas one would suppose Fairbairn thought that the facts are faithfully *recorded* in it. But we shall have to let the interesting implications of this pass. The difference between a "type" and allegory of the second sense is that the typical sense is not a different or higher sense but a "different or higher application of the same sense" (p. 3). Fairbairn regards the early Church fathers as much given to the second sort of allegory and explains this by imagining that though they stuck to the Bible's historical veracity they regarded parts of it to be at the literal level "so meagre and puerile, that it was chiefly to be regarded as the vehicle of a much more refined and ethereal instruction" (p. 3). Origen is said to have gone farther and denied the real existence of many things in the Old Testament, often arguing for a "concoction of mysteries" rather than history. Like Danielou a century later, Fairbairn regards biblical allegorizing as a "vicious system of interpretation" (p. 3).

There can be some sympathy with this view, for the lengths to which Origen carried the method, to say nothing of his followers, is extreme. The example of Origen's interpretation of Abraham's marriage to Keturah will suffice. Origen gives an elaborate reading of this to mean that Abraham on the death of Sarah, who is the "perfecting of virtue," must continue to be employed in learning:

> --which learning is called by the divine word his wife. Abraham, therefore, when an old man, and his body in a manner dead, took Keturah to wife. I think it was better, according to the exposition we follow, that the wife should have been received when his body was dead, and his members were mortified. For we have a greater capacity for

> wisdom when we hear about the dying Christ in our mortal body. Then Keturah, whom he married in his old age, is by interpretation *incense*, or sweet odor. For he said, even as Paul said, 'We are a sweet savor of Christ.' Sin is a foul and putrid thing; but if any of you in whom this no longer dwells, have the fragrance of righteousness, the sweetness of mercy, and by prayer continually offer up incense to God, ye also have taken Keturah to wife. (p. 4)

Whether or not this interpretation seems plausible to the reader on the face of it, it is worthwhile recalling that the whole matter gets very short shrift in the Bible. Genesis 25 has only the most brief mention of Abraham's marriage to Keturah, indicating that he had six children by her. The only other reference to her occurs in 1 Chronicles 1:32, where Keturah is called Abraham's concubine and her sons by him are listed.

The question arises whether it is possible to make a distinction between an allegorical interpretation and a meditation or building of thought upon a text, which is what Origen's interpretation above seems to be. Certainly countless sermons on Biblical texts, some greatly admired, have sinned allegorically if we cannot. That, in turn, raises the question of whether criticism, by which throughout I simply mean intelligent reading, is or is not really always a meditation or building of thought rather than a process of extracting an allegedly indwelling meaning. Though we may if we are good postmodernists think Origen was doing the former, it is likely that he *thought* he was doing the latter. Whatever the case, it was practices like these that established the critical paradigm eventually applied to secular texts.

The second view mentioned above, that literary texts preserve spiritual truth against its threatened extinction in modern life, is perhaps best exemplified in the interpretive work of Kathleen Raine, whose Neoplatonic reading of William Blake and commitment to the "perennial philosophy" implies that the most important line of poetry is that which maintains the tradition of secret wisdom and protects it against the modern appropriation of truth by science (Raine, 1968). It is fair to say that the late nineteenth century saw a upsurgence of fantastical learning in the form of literary occultism and that Raine is one heir to it. Some years ago Northrop Frye suggested that writers' embrace of occultism in the nineteenth century was more a literary phenomenon than an occult one, an attempt to hang on to a system of literary conventions in the face of the antiliterary hegemony of materialist science (Frye, 1963, p. 220-1). He was thinking especially, I presume, of the French symbolists' interest in the occult and esoteric, eventuating in the style of Stéphane Mallarmé, who could be said to have secularized with much irony a religious tradition of priestly occult obscurity. Charles Baudelaire had already secularized the occult doctrine of correspondences systematized for religious purposes by Emmanuel Swedenborg and had attacked materialistic literary efforts to imitate nature.

One notes that even with Reynolds and some of the Churchmen, for whom the real value of a text is not what the vulgar get out of it, there is an allegorical level that will teach the multitude without corrupting the hidden truth. Even there, the appropriate reading is not the literal level, which Reynolds tends to disregard. The dangers are not those that the Biblical typologist has worried about but those that any teacher of literature encounters in the inexperienced student who is suddenly exposed to allegorical reading and proceeds free-style to achieve an outlandishness that would have given even Origen pause. Such was my student who thought Blake's "The Sick Rose" *really* to be about a kind of plant disease he had learned of in his agriculture class. Or is this an excess of a certain literality? Perhaps it is best to describe it as the misplacement of a paradigm or the lack of a literary one. It is also bringing one's

subjective experience to bear with innocent vengeance.

Is there, once history is dismissed and we are in the area of fiction, a literal level that can be read in an unproblematic way? I doubt it, just as postmodernism tends to doubt it. The doubt may be proved by another student who began a paper for me on "Ode on a Grecian Urn" with the sentence, "John Keats went up into his attic and found this old shape." This was years before anyone in America had heard of deconstruction, but the sentence certainly problematizes the literal rendering of Keats' phrase "O Attic shape." Or is it that the student took too doggedly the teacher's admonition to consider poems to be little dramas and had to locate Keats somewhere--in the attic?

The medieval fourfold tradition of interpretation formalized by John Cassian and St. Thomas Aquinas with respect to Scripture and later secularized by Dante Alighieri proposes a "literal" level and identifies it with the historical. It then adds the "spiritual" level, which it divides into three parts--the "allegorical" (in a narrower sense than I have been using the term, since all three are types of allegory in the broader sense), the "moral," and the "anagogic." One proceeds up this scale to readings containing more and more exalted spiritual truth. St. Thomas (1256-72/1971) wrote:

> . . . whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. (p. 118-119)

So to those who would interpret Scripture, "literal" means historical, and in many theological quarters there was (and still is), as I have pointed out, considerable suspicion of allegorical interpretation because of the fear that it would spirit away the historicality of the Bible. For St. Thomas the "allegorical" level of the text was what we and earlier ages call the typological, in which the "Old Law is a Figure of the New Law." This did not interfere with the truth of history since it was regarded as definitely historical. So too with the "anagogical," since that referred to the end of history, the New Law being in turn a "figure of future glory." St. Thomas connects the "moral" sense to Christ and relates it, therefore, to what he regarded as the meaning of historical fact. It was the Platonizing kind of allegory mentioned above that threatened Biblical history, since one read quickly through the literal to ascertain its arcane meaning.

Such meanings are not likely to be reached by very many readers unless they have been trained in typological method. There is no question that the authors of the New Testament were themselves typologists and that the New and Old Testaments are full of analogies to each other. However, the ingenuity of some of the later typological readings exceeds anything they were likely to have put there and would never have been exercised as it was without some traditional endorsement of the method and a certain attitude establishing its powers and limits. The method was accomplished by assumptions that a "moral sense" was totally consistent with a typological, historical reading of Scripture. It is not surprising that as a secular criticism took shape in medieval times there was a tendency to think of the reading of at least some secular texts in terms inherited from the theologians.

The most famous explicit secularization of the Thomistic fourfold method was that of Dante. It appears in two places, first in the Convito and then (though the authorship is disputed) in a 1318 letter to Can Grande della Scala. But, of course, for Dante the literal level did not have to be historical with the urgency felt by those who needed to preserve the Bible's historical truth. In his secularization Dante points out that poets take the allegorical sense (for St. Thomas the typological) in a way different from that of the theologians. In his rendering, the allegorical and moral senses are not very different from each other. The literal, which in a fictive work can't refer to history in the same way as the Bible was said to, is "that sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter" and the "sense which we get through the letter" (Aligheri, 1318/1971, p. 121, 122). These definitions apparently did not seem problematic to Dante: the literal conveys what happened, about which there need be no difficulty. Thus, with respect to his own Commedia, he writes, "The subject of the whole work, then, taken in the literal sense only is 'the state of souls after death,' without qualification, for the whole progress of the work hinges on it and about it" (p. 122).

Modern criticism begins to make the literal problematic, and that marks the completion of a shift away from a criticism concerned mainly with subject matter and only secondarily with technique or what Dante called "the form of the treatment" as against "the form of the treatise" (p. 122). This division and the resultant emphasis on content or subject matter follow out of theories of rhetoric on the one hand and emphasis on allegory on the other. Both instructed readers over centuries in what to look for and ways to order texts. It may not be true that, as D. W. Robertson (1963) tried to show, medieval literature, including Chaucer, was ordered on principles like Dante's, but clearly a theory of polysemy led readers to look for levels of significance. In the same way, the formal ordering of tropes back at least to Quintilian and the attitude that they were only devices of persuasion and delight emphasized an abstractable content.

There are cases where critics and readers (and the audiences of drama) seemed to give equal importance to formal matters, as in the French neoclassical drama with its rigid unities of time and space or the various forms of the Renaissance sonnet. At this point, the fourfold principle of polysemy was forgotten, and readers learned other paradigms. Clearly the neoclassical standards of Corneille and others gave an informed class of play-goers a definite idea of what to expect or at least a limiting range of expectations, and to some extent played the role in the area of form that the fourfold system had in the area of content.

We have noticed that difficulty or obscurity (at least of a certain allegorical kind) was regarded by some as a positive virtue. The negative concept of difficulty arises when it is thought that the author has overstepped the bounds of decorum. The earliest secular complaint about literary obscurity that I know is that of John Dryden about the poems of John Donne, who, he claimed, "perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love" (Dryden, 1693/1962, p. 76). Dryden accuses Donne of a breach of decorum with respect to the love lyric. He condescendingly attributes a confusion, which is perhaps his own, to women readers. The charge is that Donne breached the rules of genre by means of an inappropriate complexity of thought. His remark indicates that the "metaphysical" style had introduced new problems for readers. It is not exactly that poets before them had not been philosophical. They had, but the proper way had been to be allegorical. Indeed, the poet had always been different from the philosopher, as Sir Philip Sidney (1595/1971) remarked, partly because his work was more readily understandable:

> . . . I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs, the poet is indeed the right proper philosopher. . . . (p. 161)

Sidney goes on to elicit the "pretty allegories" of Aesop's fables as proper examples (p. 161). For him, obscurity seems not a problem. For Dryden reading Donne it is, and there was not a lot more adjustment to Donne a century later when Samuel Johnson described the "metaphysical" style:

> The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (Johnson, 1783/1964, p. 2-3)

Not very much was obscure to Dr. Johnson, but his remark certainly suggests that these poets' outlandishness was a difficulty for the reader. The revival of Donne in the early twentieth century was accomplished, in the midst of bitter charges of obscurity, by T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism, which introduced a concept of irony that went far toward teaching readers what was going on in Donne's verse and to appreciate the very violence that Johnson was skeptical about and Dryden offended by.

Donne's poetry became identified with the experimental mood of modernist poetry dominated for a while by Eliot, and virtually every New Critic tried his hand at a reading of "The Canonization," making familiar to a generation of students the eccentricities of a style long out of fashion. It is convenient and perhaps right enough to think of all literature as composed of conventional and experimental elements (sometimes the conventional elements are the ground of experiment) or, as Eliot (1932) called these elements, "tradition" and "individual talent" (p. 3-11). Certainly since the romantic movement, and probably since Dryden wrote of Donne, and before, experiment has worked powerfully to make obscurity and difficulty important issues in criticism and practical issues in pedagogy.

"Experiment" is a word first associated with science, and it is not surprising that as a concept in art it followed on the burst of scientific activity in the Renaissance. It is also not surprising that obscurity as a critical issue of considerable magnitude follows experiment. Experiment comes with the unsettling of allegorical practices and tastes codified in the Middle Ages and tending to separate content from form with content privileged. The pact between author and reader begins to unravel at the same time that the number of readers, authors, and books increases dramatically. There begins, with Alexander Baumgarten's (1850) invention of the idea of "aesthetic," a new insistence on special values for literary art that tends to turn the relation of content to form to one privileging form or insisting on the indissolvability of the relation between the two in any account of meaning. The movements challenged both authors and readers to establish new paradigms. Authors and readers cannot do without recognizable conventions. Shifts in conventions can be very disturbing and lead to charges of obscurity and the experience of difficulty--until the shifts become recognized and new behavior described or recognized as a revival of some kind.

I have concentrated on the early allegorists and typologists because their methods,

developed and employed over centuries and put to work on the most revered texts, helped establish paradigms for reading of a certain sort and exemplify the work of paradigms in readerly practice. These paradigms were gradually abandoned, creating the need for new ones and for their recovery in order to read early literature with intelligence. The rise of experiment and individualism as literary values required in certain ways a new set of readerly expectations. But at the same time, literary conventions apparently overthrown have a way of persisting. In Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye (1957) amusingly writes of Walt Whitman's remark about his elegy on Lincoln:

> He was right, being the kind of poet he was, in making the content of his own When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed an elegy on Lincoln and not a conventional Adonis lament. Yet his elegy is, in its *form*, as conventional as Lycidas, complete with purple flowers thrown on coffins, a great star drooping in the west, imagery of "ever returning spring" and all the rest. (p. 102)

Readers could read without difficulty what has become one of our most memorable poems because of its elegiac qualities, which they recognized.

II.

The first poet I know of to challenge openly a set of prevailing conventions was William Wordsworth in his 1800 preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads. Before Wordsworth, poets tended to identify themselves with a prevailing tradition and set of practices even though their own might have been somewhat eccentric. We today are so used to the concept of experiment that by now the term "convention" has a pejorative ring. Wordsworth rightly thought that he had to explain "poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed," (Woodsworth, 1800/1971, p. 434) and years later he wrote, somewhat wistfully perhaps, of the need of a poet to create the taste by which he is eventually appreciated. Wordsworth overthrew received assumptions about poetic diction and consciously adopted, with important and sly variations, conventions of popular ballads. This move was made possible by the interest in ballads that was exemplified by Thomas Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765).

Criticism in the form of testaments by poets to their own methods has frequently been responsible for the initial training of readers to read works that disrupt the dominant sense of what literature properly is or does. This criticism divides mostly into two kinds. First, there is criticism of the "make it new" variety which takes a militant stand against outworn convention. A large part of Wordsworth's preface is of this sort, particularly those passages which inveigh against standard poetic diction and defend his own practices. Such manifestos tend to identify reform with return to some version of common language and some version of the natural. One discovers similar strategies in Whitman, Pound, Kerouac, and Olson. This is not to say that these poets abandon all convention, only that they don't emphasize it. Often they adopt with a difference conventions not practiced by their immediate predecessors or conventions not regarded among those predecessors as quite proper, as in the case of Wordsworth with the ballad. (Sir Philip Syndey, in "An Apology for Poetry," 1595/1971, confesses to his own "barbarousness" when he writes of being moved by the ballad of "Chevy Chase"; p. 166.) Sometimes they invert the dominant convention, as George Bernard Shaw did when in his plays he made the hero take the heroine role, the wise man the fool, etc. American literature since

Thoreau has had a strong tradition of unconventionality generated by a desire to free itself from Europe, creating its own conventions. This leads us to a second kind of criticism, which advocates a literature that is traditional while at the same it seems strange, daring, and revolutionary. Often technical invention is compensated for by symbolic traditionalism or *vice versa*. Thus William Blake, who wrote short poems meant to be sung like popular ballads and longer works with eccentric prosodic elements, depended heavily on the Bible and Milton for his symbolic materials. His methods seem to have taken something from the syncretic mythographers of his and a preceding generation, aligning him with tradition. One of the major experimentalists of modernism, T.S. Eliot, astonished the literary world with The Waste Land and its mixed versification, its parodies, its allusiveness, and its footnotes. In his criticism he emphasized the importance of tradition even to the point of insisting that when a poet seems most individualistic he is then likely to be most traditional. Eliot played a major role in the revival of Donne, the modernist criticism of Renaissance drama, and the molding of a taste that would make the acceptance of great modernists like James Joyce possible. His is a didactic criticism emphasizing historical continuity. In his own work he seems deliberately to have put his experimentalism to the business of restoring interest (with a difference) in the literature of certain past ages. His footnotes to The Waste Land, themselves an eccentricity, seem to imply that readers should recognize his allusions to past works, but that, alas, they are not likely to; the footnotes are, therefore, a sign of traditionalism after all. It is a mistake to think of them as appendages to or comments on the poem. They are part of it and pursue the same ends as the rest of the poem.

Eliot is one of the last influential nonacademic poet-critics. No one today outside the academy holds a like position. This may be evidence of a "natural" evolution. Eliot was certainly a didactic critic seeking to teach people how to read in his time, addressing problems he thought central to reading in that time. Education having become almost entirely institutional, it is not surprising that didactic criticism is now written mostly by academics. Furthermore, a combination of academic specialization and "creative" writers' identification of themselves as in antithetical opposition to the culture at large or to the strongest forces in it has tended to split writers from the practice of criticism, which has in a variety of ways become more rigid in its own conventions since its entrance into academia. The critic-teacher, unlike Hazlitt, Lamb, or Coleridge, is now in the classroom, and problems of reading are being addressed even by people who, as Auden wryly commented in a poem, "commit a social science."

This has happened in a time when the concept of literary originality, invented during the romantic movement, has itself become a convention and even a cliché of writers. It has happened in a time when the educational process has tended to ignore, often deliberately, those matters that, if taken up in a serious way, would contribute to a capacity to read literary works with greater ease. Latin and Greek have virtually disappeared from the curriculum and with them a principal vehicle for the teaching of English etymology. History has succumbed to social science and an emphasis on the present. With these things the likelihood of spotting allusions and grasping the richness of most words and many aspects of works of the past has diminished. Few students learn any terms with which to formulate a sense of literary verse forms, and memorization is no longer a pedagogical technique, so that people rarely have a store of rhythms in the mind.

On the other hand, the introduction of modernist literature into the curriculum and the serious teaching of criticism and theory have made students more likely to accept experimental

works. (It is not often understood that the developments in criticism and theory of the past sixty or seventy years have been principally pedagogic in intent and a reaction to habits of scholarship fairly remote from effective interpretive teaching.) One might add that since students today often have less knowledge and experience of literary conventions and traditions, they come to the literature they read with fewer conventional expectations. All of this may seem to lead in the direction of openness of response, and may in some degree actually so lead. But it also generates or allows to exist a radical temporal provincialism like that of some isolated tribe. This helps to vitiate the gains of openness.

More recently developments in literature and theoretical speculation about literature and language have threatened to unsettle pedagogical practices that have only recently adjusted to some of the major effects of modernism. One senses a situation in which a few students are ahead of their teachers and institutions insofar as they have a sort of intuitive grasp of postmodernist literary practice without any language to express it. The reason for this is that such practices are reflected in popular art, television, and advertising, with which the young are saturated. But most students have been so cut loose from literary tradition that they are completely at sea when faced with a text.

No literature or criticism can exist without the literary past. Experiment always experiments against something and thus depends on it for its antithetical quality. Wolfgang Iser begins a recent book on Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, one of the great radical experiments in English literature, with a chapter called "Does Tristram Shandy have a beginning?" which is a question you can't ask if you didn't know that there have been beginnings in a certain sense. Iser (1988) mentions Tristram Shandy as "a landmark of narrative literature despite its flagrant breach of convention." So Tristram Shandy counts on, brings into itself, so to speak, all the texts that *do* have conventional beginnings. The same with endings and with the concept of closure. You can't give significance to openness if there is no notion of closure to be different from.

Readers read well, then, because they have read already, that is, have learned the conventions that the text of the moment follows, undermines, parodies, rejects, or ignores. Conventions are always present, even in their absence. Conventions are, of course, of various sorts and are differently emphasized in various works and traditions. Within the larger emphases of content and form or subject matter and technique are the categories of symbolic conventions, which in recent times have been the province of a criticism that emphasizes myth and archetype (or repeated convention). The great theorist of this kind of criticism has been Northrop Frye, and Frye has always been eager to claim that his work is most relevant to what ought to be the concerns of the teachers of the youngest children, since it begins with the symbolic patterns of myth, legend, and folktale that form the basis of children's stories and are endlessly repeated in popular literature and drama.

Formal verse patterns have been the subject of study for centuries in English back to the work of George Puttenham (in his The Art of English Poesie, 1968/1589) and his contemporaries. In recent times, with developments in free verse, there may have been a tendency to underplay the importance of understanding traditional forms. But, as seems to be inevitable, free verse began to look like a convention itself, and there has now developed a literature about it (see especially Hartman, 1980), emphasizing its techniques and connecting it by contrast and parallel to what had preceded it, which includes Blake's and Hopkins' experiments. Most students don't have very much patience with discussions of prosody and the

like, or at least they have trouble with descriptive systems of some complexity. Those that don't are more likely to have read poetry or to have been read to at an early age so that certain rhythmic conventions are part of their memory in actual verse forms.

Spatio-temporal conventions, of great interest in what is now called narrative theory, are much more complicated than criticism for a long time noticed. When it got around to discussing prose fiction, the New Criticism, following the lead of Henry James' conscious practice and Percy Lubbock's commentary on him and others (James, 1948; Lubbock, 1921), emphasized the matter of focus of narration and point of view, while nearly concurrently the deployment of time became almost an obsession with certain modernist writers. The behavior of narrators became of utmost importance, and narrative acts began to be dwelt upon in critical texts as much as what was narrated. Much good teaching is simply the pointing out and harping on something that is obvious once attention is drawn to it. That is the case with narrative behavior. Readers have now learned to ask questions early on about narrators: Who is speaking? Or is he (she?) writing? Where? When? Who is listening? Reading? Such questions imply critical conventions and a narrative paradigm.

Then, of course, some writer comes along who makes a work that does not seem to have a narrator at all, but just "narration," so that the paradigmatic questions aren't adequate. In such cases two things worth mentioning here are involved: first, such writings would be far less meaningful if the old questions had not been asked and we didn't know they had been asked; second, such works often send us back to certain earlier ones which in this new light reveal an interesting aspect previously ignored. These are reasons that the history of critical practice should be studied concurrently with the history of literature. Many people think the history of criticism and theory has little to do with real literary study or with the teaching of how to read a text well. It has everything to do with it, especially when one presumes that error is instructive.

Spatio-temporal conventions in literature are often closely related to what is going on at any given time in the other arts and in the sciences. Up until the romantic period the emphasis was spatial and the principal analogue of literature was painting. Horace's so-called "speaking picture" was a cliché of criticism. This fitted well with Newtonian science. Romanticism invented the analogy with music. "All art aspires to the condition of music" is a phrase attributed to more than one nineteenth-century writer. Both the Horatian dictum and this are profoundly suggestive pedagogical statements even today, though they were more or less polemical when they were uttered. That is, like any good analogy, they reveal a lot about possible ways of reading. Successful readers respond to or develop such analogies, which both expand and limit interpretation.

The preromantic emphasis was not just vaguely spatial; it was spatial in a Newtonian and Euclidian sense, and where the emphasis on temporality came in time was itself at first strongly spatialized. Even the memory was seen in the forms of Lockean and Hartleyan associationist psychology, spatial in ways that had not yet heard of the paradoxicality of space in the later physics. The next stage of temporality came with new developments in biology and with analogies between literature and musical structures.

Such analogies border on what we conventionally call allusions. Students not much experienced in past literature are sometimes aware of allusiveness but often not of the allusion and its referent. Student readers of Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and Wordsworth often think at

first that these poets are uttering clichés, not knowing that they originated certain later well-used phrases. Sometimes they attribute a phrase to some later allusion outside of literature as did the student who marveled to me when she discovered the phrase "splendor in the grass" in Wordsworth. She had first seen it as a movie title.

Literary allusiveness is, of course, by no means always literary and ranges broadly into all facts of life. Readers' capacities here are related not just to how much literature they have read but to how much they have learned about the world. Students who often seem totally insensitive to allusions in writing are extremely alert to spoken allusion and nuance. It is to a great extent a matter of experience.

Yet an immense knowledge of conventions and traditions, history, science, and the fine arts will not alone guarantee the reader's capacity to deal with tomorrow's writing or even that of just previous generations; for writers are making it new even as they use the past. Such texts may be obscure because our paradigms don't quite contain them. Luckily there are academic critics paid to struggle with such texts, to try to build adequate paradigms that can help readers learn how to read a new range of works. Among critics, themselves, there is the same problem of the inadequate paradigm. Indeed, no paradigm is adequate in the sense that it can totally unlock meaning even for now, let alone for all time. Nevertheless, what we call obscurity is often simply that for which at the time we don't have an adequate paradigm.

As I have already suggested, contemporary students are often open to dealing with this situation even as they seem less formally equipped than their predecessors to do so. That Joyce's Ulysses is now an extremely popular subject for a course, and that his Finnegans Wake becomes so where it is taught seem to indicate this. In the case of Finnegans Wake, however, there may be another reason: the very same modernist devices used in Finnegans Wake and certain other works of the time have influenced popular entertainment--the movies, television, and perhaps, most sophisticated of all, advertising. Thus students have gained some acquaintance with modernist conventions somewhat watered down at second hand. Indeed, so-called postmodernism is to a large extent characterized by the massive use of devices present in Finnegans Wake and rock videos.

When Ulysses and Finnegans Wake first appeared, they confounded many critics. Joyce himself, fearing misunderstanding, leaked the key to the Homeric theme to Stuart Gilbert after he had talked about it during composition with Frank Budgen (Budgen, 1934; Gilbert, 1930). The first phase of Ulysses criticism involved trying to get all that straight and to follow out the implications of what seemed to be a sort of untraditional table of correspondences. The risk was always that the text would be overly schematized, making Joyce into a kind of diagrammatist, the very thing that he most decidedly was not. Eventually Gilbert's tables of correspondences seemed to be exhausted as means to understand the text and became counterproductive. The next significant phase was that of minute attention to conventions of narrative, and this proved fruitful. (This phase includes work by Wolfgang Iser, Dorrit Cohn, Jean Paul Riquelmé, and Karen Lawrence. For my own essay on this subject, see Adams, 1985-6.) But rather than starting out in this way with Finnegans Wake, criticism like George Eliot's Casaubon again tried to find the key to Joycean mythology. The first books again sought a system (see Cambell & Robinson, 1944; Hart, 1962). They were not very successful, except that they were written by very intelligent people who had occasional insights about parts of the text in spite of a questionable paradigm. Later on it began to be seen that Finnegans Wake was not the system that Joyce made in order to escape someone else's. It was the antithesis of

system as we usually think of system, and Joyce was having great fun leading its readers down false conceptual trails. This was an authorial mind determined to frustrate critical system-making. It had gone beyond the narrative strategies of Ulysses, where the concept of a narrator had been expanded to include several narrators and then an overseeing "arranger," who became a sort of character in the text. In Finnegans Wake this arranger became a "deranger," one might say, or simply narration deranged. It seemed possible at the same time to claim that Joyce was working not on the edges of literature but was expanding its very center insofar as the center of literature may be marked by resistance to systematization, which becomes identified with the assumption that language as a system built on logical and empirical principles provides a stable impression of a world already out there.

But what if language, and especially literary language, operates not so much as a representer of a world out there as a form in which we try to constitute our experience of a world which may or may not be graspable in any simple way? What if, further, language bears within itself some sort of resistance to simple representation? That would make language much more difficult right on the face of it! We would have to ask much more probing questions about what language is doing if it is not copying some presumed prelinguistic world. Our assumptions about what an interpretation is would have to change, and we might see literature not as a copier of nature but a constitutor of our culture. It would be the place we could learn what we have made and are making of the world of human activity. It would be there to tell us what we are as a society; and, because much literature is self-consciously fictive and even fantastic, it would be there to tell us what we hope for and fear. We would be looking for something different, acting on different premises when we read, and such shifts of premises are difficult. In this case it would mean that we must abandon the assumption that we need to read *through* a text to the reality on the other side that is being copied, whether that reality is declared to be nature, moral or physical truth, or even God and the sacred. We would be trying to get clear in our minds a version of verbal culture, not ultimate truths that recede infinitely down every chain of metaphor that we pursue. The difficulty of reading this way is the difficulty of overcoming certain traditional and apparently quite natural assumptions that don't hold up to scrutiny once one begins to query language itself.

In earlier ages, criticism, and nearly everyone, assumed as unproblematic the copy theory of language, and if a literary work seemed to violate this assumption it was quickly regarded as an allegory in which system and truth was hidden by a variety of cunning devices. Many literary works, like The Faerie Queene, had just enough allegory or the apparent susceptibility to allegorical reading that critics could construct meaning in this way. But beginning with romanticism both literature and criticism are strewn with practices and manifestos resisting allegory or critical allegorizing (though often falling into it in practice). This resistance becomes the central defining feature of literature for at least one type of romantic and postromantic sensibility. Finnegans Wake is powerfully resistant to allegorization, yet it is a text that knows it must, to gain its ends, presume a tradition of allegorical reading. It even contains a parody of such reading. Over and over it seems to be setting out toward expression of a mappable system. Over and over at the crucial moment, within sentence, within paragraph, within chapter, within book, it wanders from the route that for a while readers presume it to have taken. Even Samuel Beckett, one of Joyce's heirs, whose early essay on Finnegans Wake remains valuable, tried to find a system of sorts by recourse to the thought of Giordano Bruno. But to express this relationship shows in the end that only the antithetical aspects of Bruno are retained in Finnegans Wake.

What are the implications for a reasonably common feeling among postmodernist readers who have attempted to read it that Finnegans Wake approaches a sort of center of literature? Before I try to answer that, I have to notice that postmodernism, at least in its deconstructionist forms, tends to reject the idea of "literature" as a special body of texts and the idea of a "center" as the very notion of Truth that I have just called in question as available to language. One can, however, use the term "center" to mean a metaphorical place where there is exhibited most completely and intensively those characteristics of language that actually work against the simple notion of copying and representation. This is to say that Finnegans Wake challenges us to confront the possibilities of language in a new way. It is a test of the way we have learned to read, which, I have implied, is mainly the learning of literary conventions. Finnegans Wake makes us rethink what a critical paradigm needs to be. As such, it appears as a puzzle, but without a solution in the usual sense. Rather we learn from it through its very resistance to what we may have thought learning was. We are not the same in our relation to language and therefore to culture. All this is difficult, but no intelligent critic ever wholly denied that literature has its insidious and subversive side. As we rethink, we enlarge our idea of language itself, and one result is that we begin to read other and earlier works in more expansive ways. We also occasionally discover works neglected or misunderstood in ages tied to copy theories.

III.

Reading, then, is properly characterized by movement. There is no key to unlock a space of learnable rules or methods that we could long inhabit. If what I have been saying has any truth to it, learning to read literary texts is hampered by a tacit pedagogical presumption that we must begin with so-called easy texts and gradually work toward more obviously complex ones. This is the parallel in pedagogy to the idea that scholarship should establish once and for all the text and the historical and biographical context before writers should hazard an interpretation. If this principle is rigorously held to, criticism never begins, for texts are rarely finally established and contexts are infinite in possibility. Some generations of scholars avoided interpretive talk except in the most general way. I recall one of my undergraduate classes in which the professor, lecturing on Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," told us about Marvell's life, certain stylistic characteristics that linked him to the "metaphysical" poets, and some of the politics of the age. Then in the waning moments of the hour, he read the poem aloud, remarking reverently that it was very good. I quarrel only with the limits of such an approach and the assumptions behind the created limits.

Today we do not have the tendency infinitely to defer interpretation. The New Criticism pretty well put an end to that. But in the wake of its great inventive critics came a horde of academic scholars practicing a method of interpretation that quickly surpassed in sheer bulk the whole body of Biblical readings, domesticating into a dull academic exercise a movement that began in the excitement of new ideas imaginatively pursued.

At about the same time, complex developments in society and education resulted in our tendency to defer students' reading of so-called difficult texts, with the result that for some time now those in college often have not proceeded very far to grasp literary conventions, which is to say that they have great trouble reading almost any text, "literature" or not. This is not helped by the disappearance of the classics and by the great reluctance any teacher is likely to have to deal with the Bible anywhere in the curriculum. The problem begins, I suspect, with the choice of the earliest texts in the primary grades, goes on with the search for "readable" and

doctrinally neutral texts, and extends into college courses in so-called popular literature and children's literature. Teachers of these courses have found that the best and perhaps only way to teach courses on these subjects is to discuss their use of conventions of plot, character types, and imagery, principally because such texts are very conventional. Thus in some ways teachers find themselves in those courses to be compensating for an early lack. If language is as complicated as linguists, philosophers, and critics like to tell us, then it almost appears that what we call literary education is deliberately trying, like the old priesthoods, to hide something from students. One of the things that clearly needs to be treated with particular respect to recent literature, but really to all, is the role that tropes play in language. This is a subject I do not have the space to discuss here, but clearly there is a history of the way tropes have been regarded over time that is as important as the way allegory has been regarded. Indeed, allegory itself is a trope in that history, though the history of metaphor is closer to what I am concerned with. One discovers here a history of tropical conventions (see Ricoeur, 1977). The history of metaphor is central to the history of language. As far as I know, the history of language, including how language changes and the constitutive role it plays in culture, is a subject never mentioned in secondary education and not much discussed with undergraduate college students. Now, the historical and social study of language is a difficult, knotty, puzzling subject. It is also of extraordinary importance, since we all live in language and speak it; and it, as philosophers have observed, speaks us. What could be more important to gain some understanding of? Even to gain some understanding of the puzzling nature of language--to recognize its mysteriousness--is important. I have spent what some readers may regard as an inordinate amount of time on the history of interpretation in this paper. The history of interpretation is an important part of the history of language itself, and we come to understand the situation of reading and of difficulty by grasping the story of human grappling with that situation.

In these last few paragraphs the implication is that the difficulty of difficulty is not that it is difficult but that we don't face difficulty soon enough. Two problems arise as a result. First, we lost the opportunity to take advantage of the fascination of difficulty itself. If we go into a toy store, we discover shelves of puzzles of considerable complexity. Children love them. What about puzzles do they love? It has to be the difficulty and the process of overcoming it. (I shall say more about this shortly.) Second, to put off difficulty as puzzle is to increase difficulty in the same way that we increase immeasurably the difficulty of learning a foreign language when we delay it past the earliest grades in school.

There is a third problem that I shall relate specifically to reading. We too often take some variation of the position Dryden took against Donne, which is to prolong not just ignorance but to applaud superficiality in the name of decorum. The result of this situation for college teachers of literature is a paradoxical one. Suppose one tried to study a few pages of Finnegans Wake with some college freshmen. What would the situation be? All the students would probably be confounded and declare themselves helpless, but they would divide into three different groups. The first would think, though unable to express the matter clearly, that this wasn't literature because there was no hold to get on it by application of whatever conventions they knew. The second would not be sophisticated enough to think in these terms, but some of them (and here is the paradox), because of their innocence to some extent, would be intrigued and unencumbered by the presumptions of the first group. They would have to be told what it means to overturn conventions and how that works in the text. This would involve discussion of the conventions themselves. Presumably, in the best of pedagogical worlds, the two groups would come together after a while. The third group would be perhaps the most

interesting and challenging, though maybe not the most difficult to teach. This would be the group that had by a sort of osmosis picked up quite a few conventions from our most popular and ubiquitous arts: advertising and television, including rock video. These things tend to be very conventional and very contemporary, which means that they lag behind the contemporary avant garde of literature and water down literary complexity for purposes of immediate and vulgar, which is to say in this country commercial, effect.

Anyone brought up on "I Love Lucy" and "Mr. Ed" is bound to be puzzled and disoriented by rock videos in a way not unfamiliar to people brought up on Hardy and Hemingway who have opened Finnegans Wake. I have used Finnegans Wake in college classes and discovered that modest gains can be made with it in teaching how to read a literary text. This, it turns out, is to offer students a puzzle and engage them in the dialectic of convention and variation or revolt. Extreme texts, not at the periphery but in the center, and therefore strange, are actually quite useful for this endeavor. Of course, one has to be able to recognize the difficulty as a puzzle--a puzzle, in the case of literature, without an allegorical key or the expected kind of solution. Students need to come to understand that to read a text is never a terminal event like the placement of the last jigsaw piece. To learn this and be able to live with it and be satisfied with it is itself a solution. Coleridge observed quite correctly that with literature the process of reading, which he characterized as a journey, is properly more important than the destination. Many years ago the New Critics attacked the "heresy of paraphrase," claiming that poems don't have paraphrastic solutions. The recent movement known as deconstruction says this again with greater insistence and application to all kinds of texts. This movement notices something about the particular difficulty, or mysteriousness, of language itself, not just poetry. It is a mystery that can turn into a fascination in the classroom, if students can be made to realize how much of our life is involved in language. Under such conditions Finnegans Wake and many relatively recent texts that are about language even as they are about life can be made to yield up a fascinating difficulty.

In any learning to read, one needs to come fairly soon to the realization that one's subjectivity is alone not of much critical value and that literature in general doesn't operate according to the subject-object paradigm, which was invented and sustained by a strongly antiliterary scientific outlook. The aim of the reader of literature should be attainment of a position, never in fact reachable. I have elsewhere called it the position of the "authoritively projected reader" (Adams, 1983, p. 242-64). Every text demands (and this may be a demand that the author has not explicitly made) an effort of reading that takes readers outside themselves to a position transcending the old personal limits and foibles of taste. Readers are challenged to be the readers that the text demands. A grasp of conventions is a help in this. That is, however, only the beginning, and there is no ending. Blake in his difficult so-called prophetic books suggests a phrase for what he regarded as the greatest of ethical acts: annihilation of the selfhood. To try to become the reader that the text demands is a movement toward such annihilation, which is ethical because it is an effort to break out of one's subjectivity into an area where one can identify oneself with others who have tried to do the same. In the most intense of such experiences, a moment in a class on Finnegans Wake, in an audience at King Lear, at those times when we sense something has truly happened, and it is possible to express to each other something of it in nearly adequate words, we achieve a sort of ethical bond, which is the best reason for the critical effort that I know.

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